Oak Carving at Ashburton in Tudor Days

by P F S Amery

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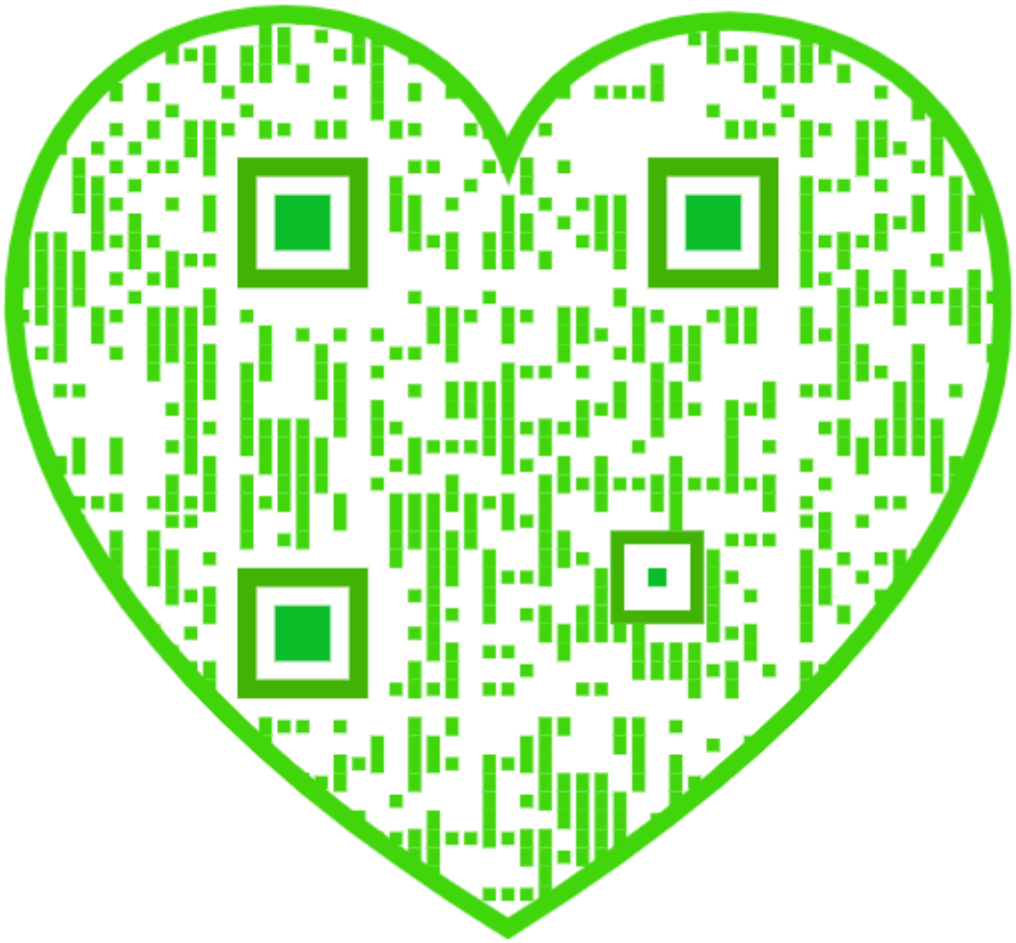

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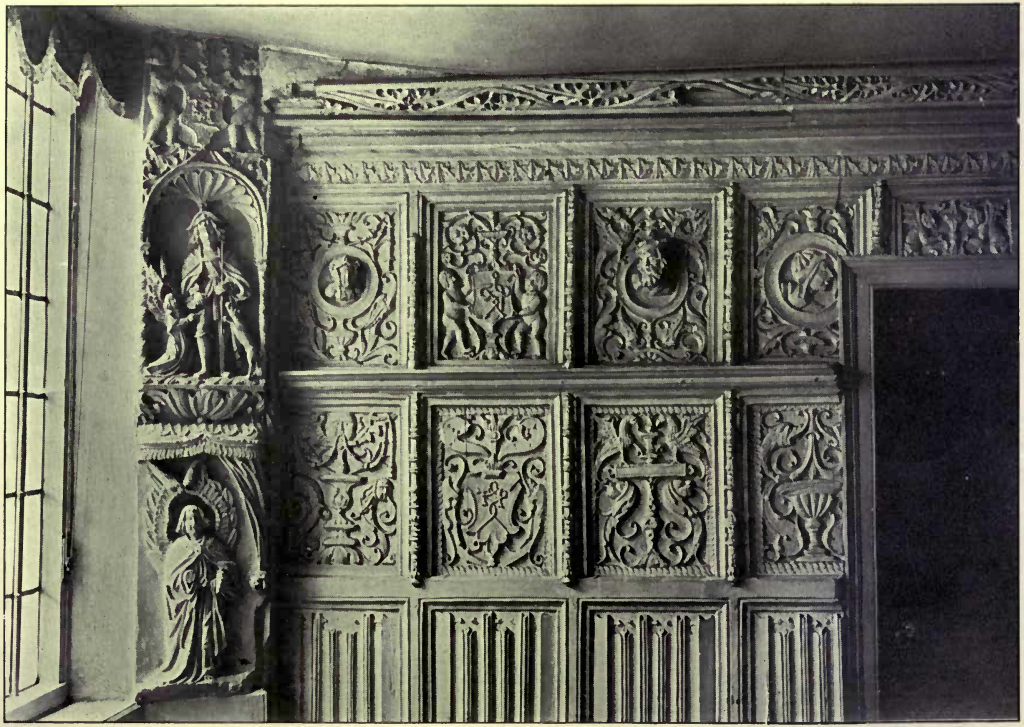


Part of the South side of the Panelled Room.

1905 The property sold

Before 1900. I went in with Mr J S Amery to see this panelling. I expect the photographs were taken at that time

Recently, within the last two years, Devonshire has become poorer in works of art by the removal from the county of a series of panels, which for nearly four centuries has covered the walls of a room in the old house of a branch of the Prideaux family at Ashburton.

These panels, with a cornice and a canopy, were always said to have been taken from the parish church of S. Andrew at the time of the Reformation. On the other hand, judges of such work consider the greater part to have been purely secular work. We are now able to reproduce these from photographs taken by Mr. John S. Amery, as a record of what we have lost, with the hope that more information may be forthcoming respecting the place they take in the history of art and the lessons they teach concerning local craftsmen in the early sixteenth century.

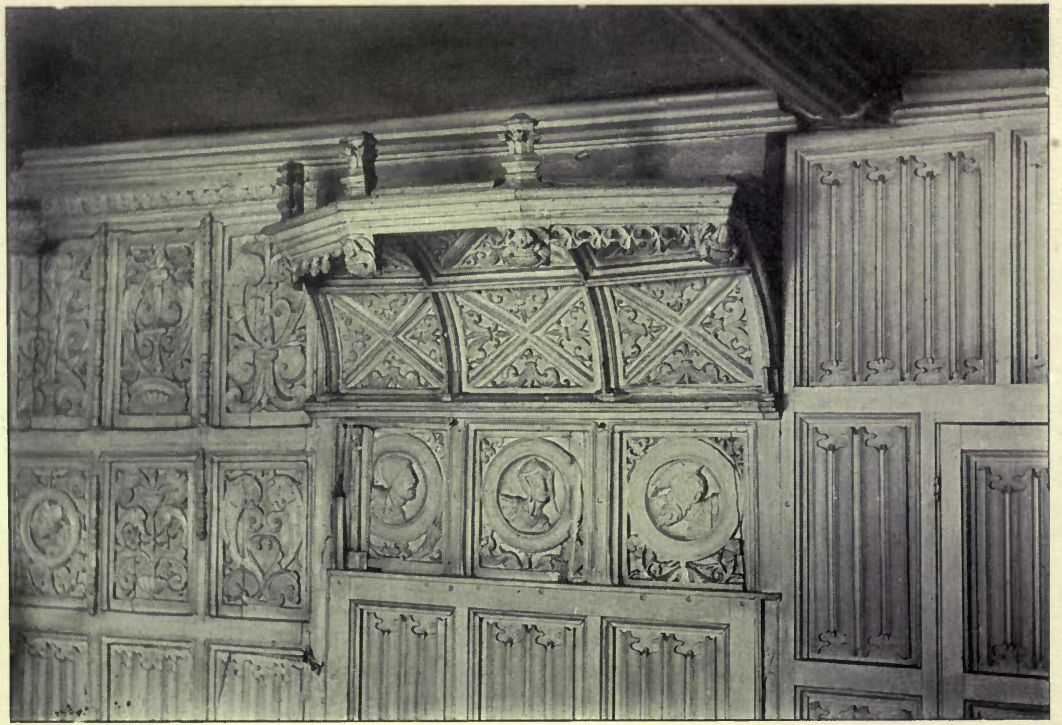
Authorities on the great restorations of our Devonshire churches in the late fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries, when most of the rood screens appear to have been erected, account for the distinct type of the Devonshire screens, with all their beauty of design and execution, to the fact that our native stone is intractable and difficult to work and frequently too coarse to take fine designs. The craftsmen in Devonshire, therefore, turned their attention principally to oak as the only material suitable for fine carving, and so learned to make the most of the good qualities of the native oak which in those days grew so freely in their own neighbourhood. The Devonshire screens were for the most part the work of local carvers, of whom many schools must have existed in the villages and country boroughs in the fifteenth, sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. These screens were often erected as the result of parishioners' own effort, and instances are recorded in which they were due to the generosity of churchwardens. They were mainly the result of local effort, but here and there we find unmistakable traces of foreign workmanship. This, however, is the exception, and was often the outcome of the generosity of a prelate or local magnate who had visited foreign parts and brought over workmen to apply their skill on English subjects (see "Devonshire Screens and Roodlofts," by F. Bligh Bond, F.R.I.B.A., *Trans. Devon. Association*, vols. xxxiv. and xxxv., 1902 and 1903).

It is, I believe, to one of these local carving schools we owe the designs and execution of the almost unique work so recently taken from us, of which Mr. Baring-Gould says (in his *Book of the West*, vol. i., p. 258) some of the wood carving in and about Ashburton is of the very finest quality, quite unsurpassed in its style. Work by apparently the same hand may be seen at Great Fulford in the hall.

The carvings referred to were fitted around the walls of a small back room in the oldest part of a comfortable town house in West Street, Ashburton. The back buildings and stable were entered from the left of the Church gates, while a footpath under an archway also gave admittance to them. The old walled garden ran still further back and bounded the churchyard at the eastern end of the Church. The wainscotted room in this house was about 14 feet square and 8 feet high, and on its western wall was a crocketted canopy with finials of fleurs-de-lis reaching almost to the ceiling. The front part of this canopy at the angles, between a border of fleurs-de-lis, exhibited half-length figures of the four Evangelists, represented as winged men holding shields inscribed with monograms. The groining of the overhanging canopy was composed of six panels, curved and richly carved. Underneath at the back were three panels, apparently unconnected with the canopy itself, containing busts in high relief within a broad plain circle. Mr. Worthy, in his *Ashburton and its Neighbourhood* (p. 41), describes these as representing Queen Mary and her consort Philip of Spain, and a figure in armour, perhaps S. George. It will be shown that this carving was executed prior to her time; but a more recent authority sees nothing to suggest royalty, and the figures may represent Master Thomas Prideaux, who fitted up the room, with his wife and mother, as two appear to represent females. Below we have the usual linen pattern.

Mr. Baring-Gould (*Book of the West*, vol. i., p. 258) refers to this canopy as a portion of a canopied altar piece with wings, which was ~~over~~ in one of the chapels of the Parish Church. In fact, I have heard the late owner say there were once sides and shelves across on which jars of preserves were kept until the weight broke them down.

On the removal of these things from the Church, Robert Prideaux, the son of Thomas, obtained this relic,



Carved Oak Canopy.

which very probably his father had given, and fitted it into the panelling of his father's room.

Opposite the canopy in the east wall is a large wide window; the recess formed by the thickness of the house wall is divided into six compartments, three on either side. The top compartment on the south side had the figures of two boys holding a shield, inscribed with the interlaced letters T.P. in a monogram.

The middle compartment had a carved representation of S. Roch, as described by Baring-Gould (*Lives of Saints*, Aug. 16th), "represented as a pilgrim, with his left leg exposed in which is a wound, an angel at his side touching his thigh. Also frequently at his side a dog bearing a loaf in his mouth." The legend of S. Roch says that wherever he went he had miraculously expelled the plague by the sign of the cross. He had healed the plague-stricken by thousands till he was himself attacked, when a dog brought him bread from a Count's table every day. The Count following the dog, found S. Roch lying in a miserable hovel, convalescent. An angel had struck him on the thigh, and from the touch the plague boil had risen and burst. Subsequently he was imprisoned at Montpellier. Feeling himself dying, he prayed that who should invoke him and rely on his merits should be healed, and an angel appeared in the prison and wrote a tablet: "Those labouring from the plague who fly to the patronage of S. Roch shall be healed."

We find in 1522 the churchwardens paid viij^{s} jx^{d} for a picture of S. Roche, perhaps the identical panel. It must be remembered the frequent visitations of plague in England, and those towns on the main roads to sea ports frequented by pilgrims returning from Italy were much exposed to it. In fact, one of the functions of the ancient Guild of S. Lawrence at Ashburton, re-founded by Bishop Stapledon in 1314, was "*the relief and sustenance of such people as are infected when the plage is in the towne, that they being from all company may not infect the whole.*"

The lower compartment had a full length figure of S. Matthew, represented as a winged man wearing a mantle.

On the north side of the window, the top compartment had a vase or censer between two eagles, out of which they appeared to be drinking, all carved in bold relief.

The middle compartment had a most elaborate panel, described by Mr. Worthy as the Blessed Virgin in her ecstacy, depicted with long hair but no veil, kneeling under a canopy at a prie-dieu, her left elbow on an open book and hands raised in wonder; on the outside of the curtain stands an aged and attenuated figure, probably Simeon; and over his head, divided by a band of scalop shells, a half length representation of S. Peter, wearing a triple crown, in the act of blessing, symbolical of the Holy Catholic Church. Mr. Worthy adds: "The ancient seal of the Chapter of Exeter represents S. Peter wearing a triple crown" (*vide* Oliver's *History of the Cathedral*, p. 479). We may note that the crown in the carving is a double, not a triple crown. The latter was not adopted by the Pope until 1410-1419; moreover, the figure holds no keys. It is evident this legend requires further study.

The lower compartment represents a full length figure of S. Thomas à Becket in the act of blessing. The chapel in the north transept of the Church was dedicated to him.

The south wall of the room abuts on the south side of the window, and above a dado of rich linen pattern was covered by a series of unique panels, very handsomely carved, but all of purely secular characters. But above this original moulding, which it partly covered, there had been added at a subsequent date a piece of hollow-work cornice from the rood screen. Eighteen of these panels were perfect, but there had been more, for about a century ago a door was made in this wall, when four were destroyed save a small section of two between the top of the door and the cornice. They are all well shown in the illustrations. Eight of these panels had small busts within a broad ring carved on them. Two in the upper row between the window and new door were said to represent Henry VII. and his Queen, Elizabeth of York. On these panels, amongst grotesque figures, birds and human heads, were seen shields with the initials T.P. in various forms of monogram, and in some cases the carved scrolls suggested these letters. These panels are worth close study, not only for design, but for their excellency of workmanship, and are magnificent samples of domestic decoration.

Continuation of the South side of the Room.

An oak beam supporting the ceiling ran across the centre from east to west, commencing on the east side at the north wall of the window on which it rested to the north side of the canopy opposite. This beam was well carved, especially at the ends, which are shown in the photographs. The north wall and portion of the west beyond this beam were covered with panels of plain linen pattern in four rows, while a cornice from the rood screen borders the north side. All these carvings have been covered with coats of white paint for generations, which to a great extent choked and disfigured the beautiful and elaborate work, and obliterated the delicate tool marks so dear to the critical eye. Of the carvings from this room we may say they were mostly secular, the exceptions being the canopy on the west wall, the four window panels with sacred legends, and the cornice on the north and south walls, which show evidence of their having been added subsequent to the fitting up of the room.

The parish of Ashburton possesses an almost unique series of churchwardens' accounts contained in a MS. quarto volume written on paper, with parchment covers, and is in an excellent state of preservation. There are very few erasures, and the ink has kept its colour. Its contents extend over a period of a hundred years, the date of the first entry being A.D. 1479 and the last 1580. The book is principally in Latin. English, however, is frequently used where the proper Latin word was not forthcoming, and some of the accounts are wholly in the mother tongue. A copious abstract and translation was made and published by the late Revd. J. H. Butcher in 1870, when curate of Ashburton, but copies are now scarce.

It has been mentioned that a branch of the ancient Devonshire family of Prideaux resided at Ashburton in Tudor times, and there appears to have been more than one household of the name. They filled various positions, and are frequently mentioned in the churchwardens' accounts as Stannators attending the Tinners' Parliament which met on Crockern Tor to regulate the mining industry; two were attorneys-at-law. John Prideaux paid a fee in 1503 to brew in the churchhouse. Another John, a clerk, received iij^{s} ij^{d} "for playing at the organ the year 1509-10." In

1515 we find "received v^{s} viij^{d} for use of cross at the death of Richard Pridiaux at home and in the church."

The apparent head of the family was Master Thomas Prideaux, attorney-at-law, who owned and resided in the house in which the carved wainscotted room was fitted up. We find him churchwarden in 1506, and again in office for the two years 1510 to 1512. He died in 1546, and was succeeded in the house by his son, Robert Prideaux, also an attorney-at-law, who outlived his four sons and left the house to his daughter Elizabeth, the wife of John Dolbeare, also of an old Ashburton family who frequently filled public offices. Thence by inheritance the house descended to the Parhams and to its late owner, Mrs. Cruse, who left it to her husband, at whose death in 1905 the property was sold. Each generation has scrupulously kept the old Prideaux room as a sacred charge. The last Mr. Parham re-built the front of the house and raised the height of the rooms, but that portion containing the old room was allowed to remain as it was.

During the first half of the sixteenth century we find a thorough restoration of the Parish Church was commenced while Thomas Prideaux served as warden for the two years 1510 and 1511. The commencement was made by re-seating various parts of the Church, which appears to have taken five years to complete in 1516. In this Prideaux was the leading spirit, and advanced money from time to time as required. He secured an able foreman in John Mayne, most probably from Exeter, and a local carpenter, John Soper, whose descendants are still carpenters at Ashburton. We find in 1511 the sum of xiii^{s} iiij^{d} was paid by the wardens on account of the seating, and in 1512, when Prideaux went out of office, the sum of "ij^{li} vj^{s} viij^{d} in part payment for seating beyond that allowed from account of Thomas Prideaux." In 1513 "paid iiij^{li} xvj^{s} iiij^{d} to John Mayne toward the payment of x^{li} for seating beyond iij^{li} paid before." 1514, "paid John Mayne ij^{li} ix^{s} beyond the vij^{li} xv^{s} viij^{d} in part payment of xj^{li} for making the seating (le sege) of the church." 1515, "paid John Mayne iv^{s} jv^{d} beyond x^{li} v^{s} viij^{d} paid before in part payment for xj^{li} for making seats (sedilem) of the church, also ij^{li} xix^{s} iij^{d} for timber work for the church."

Panels on the North side of the Window.

Panels on the South side of the Window.

This seating most probably included a certain amount of carved work in the chancel and chapel stalls which were locally made, as different woods are used to define them, the timber having been purchased separately. It must be borne in mind that the back of Prideaux's premises opened on the Churchyard, and his outbuildings were conveniently situated for workshops, where John Mayne and Soper, with doubtless younger apprentices, worked under the master's eye. Prideaux had retired from the churchwardenship in 1512, evidently finding it invidious to represent the parish and be chief craftsman doing work for the Church at the same time.

The time had now arrived to bring the fine old church of S. Andrew up to date. It is very probable that a screen dividing the chancel from the nave, of the usual Devonshire open tracery pattern, then existed. The days for roodlofts had arrived, and much consultation as to ways and means must have taken place. We find in 1516 the image of the Blessed Virgin was painted over the high altar at the cost of vj^{s} viii$^{d.}$

In 1519 the Dean of Exeter visited the Church and stayed with Mr. Thomas Prideaux. Bearing in mind that the Dean and Chapter hold the rectorial tithes and patronage of the living, this visitation was no doubt a meeting to decide what should be done and how to meet the expense. During the next two years the accounts only show matters relating to windows and vestments, but in 1521 John Ford, a leading parishioner, gave x^{li} toward a roodloft and jx^{d} toward mending a small statue (emendacioe statvis) of the lord King Henry VI. at the same place, viz., on the screen. The wide span of the nave rendered it necessary that a firm foundation should be obtained to sustain the roodloft beams clear of the old screen below. For this purpose a long block of granite was let into the base of the arcading just above the capitals on the inner side of each of the pillars; these blocks projected well outside and inside the screen. On the projecting portions of these blocks rested the ends of oaken beams which bridged the nave. The Abbot of Buckfast presented three pieces of good timber for this purpose, doubtless already well seasoned. The wardens paid in 1521 "jv^{li} jv^{s} jx^{d} for putting up the

roodloft and for wainscott timber, poles, &c., and xxiij^{s} vij^{d} for 'spolying' (converting) timber for the same." In 1522 we find an entry: "Paid viij^{s} jx^{d} for a picture of S. Roche; viij^{s} ij^{d} for a tablement of S. John; xvii^{s} viij^{d} for making the roodloft; iij^{li} xvj^{s} making the seats of the church; jv^{li} vij^{s} ij^{d} for timber and carriage and a reward to the Superior of Buckfast this year."

1523. "Paid ij^{s} jx^{d} for timber and working the same for the stall for the clergyman (clerico) in the chancel; viij^{s} jv^{d} to Peter Kerver for making the tabernacle over the altar of S. John (Baptist)."

1524. "For mending the pyx viij^{d} for the body of Christ."

1525. Saw the completion of the work.

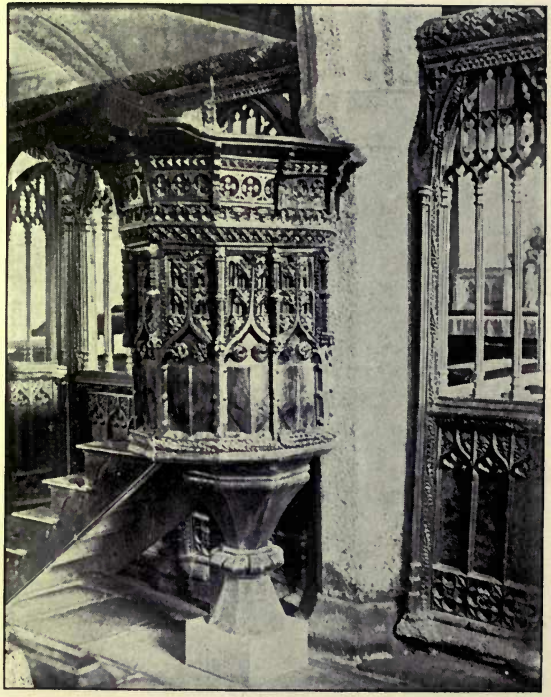
It appears the east ends of the north and south aisles, inside the line of the screen, were the chapels of the Blessed Virgin and S. John the Baptist; these were open to the chancel. This year parclose screens were erected between the chancel and chapels and the aisles paved with "tylyng." Also images set up at the altar of S. John at the cost of xiv^{d} including the "yearne penny" of the paynter, and a S. George was set up at the cost of vij^{s} viii^{d} including the ironwork, also a seat in S. Thomas' aisle, viz., the N. Transept Chapel.

Then came the consecration, which cost x^{li} jx^{s} iv^{d} to the suffragan for his cost at Ashburton; to Dr. Tillet, commissioner of the Bishop and registrar of the same Bishop: and the expenses of Richard Dolbeare and the churchwardens.

Thus the restoration had taken twenty-four years in carrying out, the work having been executed in the town, probably in Mr. Prideaux's workshops. By this time there must have been many skilled carvers and joiners besides John Mayne and Soper; doubtless occasionally experts had been secured for special work, but the greater part, of which we find no mention, was given as a labour of love.

Mr. Prideaux again served as churchwarden for two years, viz., 1528 and 1529, during which several additions were made. Mrs. Prideaux gave vj^{li} xiij^{s} iiij^{d} for the purchase of vestments and John Ford, a streamer of S. George, and much painting was also done.

The Old Ashburton Pulpit
now at Bigbury.



Holne Pulpit.

A handsome Tudor pulpit and lectern of the time of Bishop Oldham, 1504-1519, remained in use in the Church until the restoration in 1777, when they were sold to Bigbury, where they are still in use. This was done when Sir Robert Palk returned from India and presented a most handsome *three-decker* pulpit, a marvel of joinery and teak, which occupied the centre of the transept until a recent restoration swept that away also. The Oldham lectern was an owl carved in oak and well painted. The Bishops of Exeter held the manors of Ashburton since the Norman days, viz., the royal Borough in chief from the King as a secular fief and the ecclesiastical manor as a spiritual fief. Oldham's family badge was an owl, and in compliment to him the owl was carved. When it arrived at Bigbury the people there could not understand how at Ashburton they mistook an owl for an eagle, the usual form for a lectern. They had the head removed and an eagle's substituted. The shape of the feathers is different, and the whole bird is now an ecclesiological monstrosity.

The pulpit was octagonal, with shields on the panels, from which all the traces of armorial bearings had been removed. The decorated cornice is very fine, and the slender, well-carved foot renders the whole an elegant piece of workmanship. A very similar pulpit may be seen at Holne, a neighbouring parish to Ashburton, where the arms on the shields are still visible (see *Notes and Gleanings*, vol. iii., p. 177), and among them that of Oldham, *a chevron or, between three owls proper*. It is very likely that both these pulpits were made about the same time at Prideaux's workshop.

We can fancy with what interest and wonder the young people of Ashburton must have watched the work and observed how, under the skilful hands of John Mayne, graceful saints emerged from blocks of oak.

The last bit of work recorded on the roodloft was in 1545, when the wardens paid xvj^{d} for setting up of Mary and John.

1546-7 records the deaths of King Henry VIII., Thomas Prideaux, John Dolbeare and Elizabeth his wife.

1547. The Church had been visited by the Commissioners and the rood ordered down. We find a payment of iij^{s} iiij^{d} for taking down the rood and images. It does

not say what became of these things, but we can understand how from time to time young Robert Prideaux would save such as he could to place in his late father's panelled room, and this accounts for the bits of ecclesiastical work we found placed subsequently to the wainscotting. He appears to have saved either now or in Queen Elizabeth's time the whole of the beautiful cornice of the roodloft, which we found on the north and south walls of the room, measuring 28 feet, about the width of the chancel screen.

I may add that in 1555 a new rood was ordered from Exeter of one Martyn the carver, cost xl^{s} and iiij^{d} fetching, and ij^{d} to George Wyndeyate for setting up the rood. During Mary's time we find payments for images from Exeter, from which it appears the old carving school had dispersed on the death of Thomas Prideaux.

The whole of this carved work was purchased by a London dealer, and has, we are informed, since been secured by a nobleman for his private chapel.